

The Displaced Persons Of Miramar

By MYRNA WALSH



Fr. Joseph Gunning

The little children played tag at the foot of the Virgin Mary statue. Their schoolhouse, an imposing brick structure, was deceptively solemn. Inside the chirping of busy children filled the classrooms. A little black girl was given a ride on a pallet. She could move only her head, but when she looked up, she saw Mickey Mouse and Puff the Magic Dragon smiling at her from their painted places in the hallways.

Nearby, in the chapel, the stained glass windows filtered streamers of colored lights in the cool, quiet air. At the foot of the knoll, the tadpoles would soon swim in the pond, supervised by the hand-built stone lighthouse that rose on the tiny island.

This is Miramar now. In another few months, the children will be gone; their education forever terminated at this location.

Lee Kennedy and J.A. Schlaikjer as Bay Farm Trust have taken an option to build condominiums on the grounds and buildings belonging to the Society of the Divine Word.

Father Joseph Gunning, president of the non-profit, religious and charitable corporation that runs Miramar, said, "We are only selling part of Miramar. The best way to put it is that all the property on the west side of park St., all the buildings and land of about 100 acres, will be sold. The 40 acres across the street (the retreat house and office) will not be sold and is not an option."

As president and superior, Father Gunning signed the option that terminates his agreements with Head Start, Fisher Junior College and the Kennedy Center's Programs in Early Development. He had

Kennedy Center and with a special nod to Brother James who walked her up and down the corridors every day. Now she is in a nearby school system, just a year behind her classmates. If she had not been brought here but to a state institution, she would still be lying on a bed."

Before coming to Miramar, he served as a pastor to a black ghetto in New Jersey for 10 years. One of 3 whites, he traveled with the group as it made its first pilgrimage to Rome. His room is filled with mementos of "the happiest years of my life," and his former parishioners still correspond and send gifts.

The trip to Rome was earned through 4 years of hard savings that gave the inner city blacks a once-in-a-lifetime chance to pray at the font of their religion. It was during a previous trip to the Eternal City that Father Gunning had felt the immensity and power of his faith. He was in the city when the Vatican Council was convened in 1965. "It was unbelievable. Everyday there would be some new development or change. I remember going into St. Peter's in Rome and seeing 2,000 mitred bishops, 1,000 on each side of the aisle. When I went into that session and saw all those holy men who had reached bishopric, I was enveloped by the Holy Spirit. Every time I went into St. Peter's my faith deepened. It didn't change me but confirmed me in my priesthood."

It is this faith that also allows him to see renewal when his work of the past 7 years is "crumbling." When the residence, gymnasium, chapel and the land are sold, the Society will consolidate. It will operate a modest retreat and vocational recruitment center on the east side of park St. and work to raise funds for its missionary apostolate throughout the world. Father Gunning said the Society was started in 1922 as a missionary sending society that spreads the gospel to countries where it had not been preached. About 55 priests have gone forth from Miramar to teach throughout the world. The Society has about 5,000 brothers and was pre-eminent in China where it operated Peking University before the communist takeover. In the late 1940's, many of the brothers went underground as the government established a schismatic church that was not subservient to Rome. Father Gunning dreams of being assigned to China and resurrecting the old structure as he did at Miramar.

If Miramar is sold, many of the artifacts collected by the missionaries in New Guinea and China will be sent to the Society's museum in Chicago. The priests who work at Miramar will be either reassigned or continue to operate the retreat located in a rambling house that must have inspired the name "Miramar" - beautiful view of the sea." Working and residing in the 105-year-old brick residence with Father Gunning are Frs. Lawrence Poetz and Richard Graham. Four

free, paying only the cost of utilities.

Father Gunning explained: "The final say (to sign the option) was made here, but as in a business corporation, the decision was made elsewhere, at the Society's headquarters in Washington."

He said that the decision to sell was based on the high cost of maintaining the buildings. "Already this year, I've spent \$36,000 to heat the buildings and I'll need another \$4,000 before the season is over. People realize the rising cost of fuel in their own small way, but in 1974 and 1975, every bill I received for oil was \$200 more than the one before. I paid \$3,900 for one load of oil." After those steep increases, the seminary was incurring a \$15,000 annual deficit which the schools and college were unable to meet due to their own financial crunches.

For Father Gunning the decision is "frustrating." He spoke openly, "It's crushing to see those programs for handicapped kids wiped out because of the cost of oil, because we can't afford to go into debt. It's disappointing. I begged my superior to let us keep going." He suggested turning Miramar into a boys' school or a special retirement center. But his suggestions were turned down because of the terrible heating costs.

Abandoning part of Miramar is especially disappointing to the 68-year old priest who first came to the unused and isolated seminary 7 years ago. Within the first week of his arrival, he had started discussions with Luella Donovan, the founder of the Kennedy Center and former nurse to the famous family. By the end of the first year, the building housed the Kennedy Center and a Baptist Church Bible School. Head Start and Fisher Junior College also found space in the 4-story building. The Bible school, which was having financial problems, relocated. When he invited programs to use the facilities, he figured the cost of maintenance closely. "We were not out to make money, but to do social service," he said.

Providing a "home" for handicapped and at-risk children has been personally satisfying to Father Gunning. "This is missionary work. If I was doing this in India or Africa, I'd be a great missionary, but here I'm a failed businessman."

Father Gunning, one of those forever robust people who appears to derive his strength equally from his faith and his love for his fellow man, stood by the entrance of the residence, watching the children scamper around a centuries-old copper birch. He told about a special child, Julie. "She was one of the first handicapped children at Miramar and she was brought in on a pallet. Lying motionless. She was about 3 and couldn't move her hands or feet or speak. Three years later, she could walk and say a few words. All through the efforts of the staff of the

work in Boston. Miramar has been a spiritual center since 1900 when the land and buildings were given to Cardinal O'Connell of Boston.

The days when Miramar sheltered programs for the disadvantaged or offered its park-like grounds to families from Boston or down the street are ending. Father Gunning, comparing Miramar to a tree that had been pruned, said optimistically, "We're not quitting. We'll spring up again and continue to make the spiritual impact we did in the past. There's plenty of work to be done."

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Bob Littleton, the director of the Kennedy Center, said his group is negotiating with a couple of school departments on the South Shore which are consolidating for space in their buildings. The center housed at Miramar since 1975, serves a wide range of developmentally delayed and severely handicapped children. About 70 children from the South Shore now attend classes at Miramar. Littleton said, "They (the priests) have been wonderful to us during our stay, very supportive."

Dr. Pat Daly of the Head Start program, refused to comment on the scope of her program or plans for relocating.

Director of Fisher Junior College at Miramar, Ray Raposa, said the school is looking at a number of locations but has no firm plans at this time. The campus, which has been in Duxbury for nearly 3 years, serves 285 students and has a staff of 25 full and part-time teachers. Raposa commented on the "very good relations" he has had with the priests.